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Speaking the Same Language:

Re-imagining Wellbeing Monitors for Social and Economic (and Environmental) History

Looking at a problematic issue today always involves history: “how did we get to this point?” is likely to be the first reaction, shortly to be followed, hopefully, by “what can we do about it?” Although frequently cast in opposition, history and action seem to be, in this instance, closely intertwined. Dealing with tomorrow’s problems therefore requires a clear understanding of today’s challenges and the large socio technical systems that have shaped them throughout the years: by grasping the complexity of this interconnected world, it becomes possible to make better informed and historically grounded decisions. As David Armitage and Jo Guldi have so eloquently suggested already a while back, the time is ripe for historians to leave their self-imposed seclusion, reengage with policymaking and public debate and reclaim their former societal role, which, over recent decades, have increasingly been assumed by economists.¹

But before history can jump into action it is necessary that history speaks the language of action, and this means speaking the (current) language of governance, policymaking and public debate. This article proposes to explore one specific monitoring model currently used by policymakers, public institutions, civil-society groups and the media, as an initial vantage point for social and economic (and environmental! more on this later) historical research and communication. The model in question is the Monitor Well-Being and the Sustainable Development Goals developed by CBS – Netherlands Statistics, first presented to the Dutch parliament for the 2018 *Verantwoordingsdag* (Accountability Day).² This monitor was developed

¹ Or to paraphrase their stance in a slightly controversial manner: more historians, and less economists. Which, I believe, bodes especially well for economic and social historians. David Armitage and Jo Guldi, “The Return of the Longue Durée: An Anglo-American Perspective,” *Annales. Histoire, Sciences Sociales - English Edition* 70, no. 2 (2015): 237–38, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S2398568200001126>.

² The Dutch government commissioned the development of this monitor, which was designed in line with the recommendations of the Council for European Statisticians (CES) and grounded in the Brundtland conception of sustainable development. On that basis, the monitor adopts the following definition of wellbeing: “Well-being concerns the quality of life here and now as well as the extent to which this quality is achieved at the expense of future generations or of people in other countries.” Edwin Horlings and Jan-Pieter Smits, “Measuring Well-Being and Sustainability in the Netherlands: The First Monitor of Well-Being,” paper presented at ESCoE Conference on Economic Measurement, May 8, 2019.

as a way of tracing how the country is doing, not only in the present but also across time and beyond its borders. It begins with the dimension *Here & Now*, which looks at the conditions people experience in their daily lives—whether housing is affordable, how satisfied individuals feel, or the extent to which they are exposed to particulate pollution. The second dimension, *Later*, shifts the perspective forward, asking what kinds of resources future generations will inherit. It examines the accumulation or depletion of capitals—economic, natural, human, and social—drawing on indicators such as educational attainment, trust in institutions, household debt, and cumulative CO₂ emissions. The final dimension, *Elsewhere*, widens the lens to consider the Netherlands' footprint abroad, tracing how domestic choices affect the well-being of people in other parts of the world through measures like resource imports and development assistance.

There are several interesting characteristics of this model. Firstly, and of importance to historians, is that it proposes an intergenerational (i.e. historical) approach to sustainability, with a comparison between a certain *here & now* and a certain *later* bringing the issue of temporality to the table. Second, it proposes to track down interactions between economic, social and environmental developments over time, by allowing the charting of trade-offs and synergies. Finally, it aims to give visibility to the entangled histories between different world regions, the *elsewhere* of the equation, which often are left out of the (public) discussion usually confined to national boundaries. Previous work by Harry Lintsen, Frank Veraart, Jan-Pieter Smits and John Grin has already suggested the potential of this framework to reveal long-term patterns and interactions while also tracing shifts in what societies consider important—from nineteenth-century concerns about extreme poverty to today's focus on climate pressures and the natural environment.³ It is auspicious for the further development of this framework for historical research that the book attracted the attention of policymakers and was cited on several occasions in debates within the Dutch Parliament.⁴

³ Harry Lintsen et al., *De kwetsbare welvaart van Nederland, 1850-2050: naar een circulaire economie* (Prometheus, 2018); Harry Lintsen et al., *Well-Being, Sustainability and Social Development: The Netherlands 1850–2050* (Springer International Publishing, 2018), <https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-76696-6>.

⁴ A search of the parliamentary transcript records produces the following results: <https://tinyurl.com/293vmx39>.

In a certain way, this monitor echoes, gives shape and expands on Pim de Zwart's robust predictions (again from 2018) that the next big research questions for social and economic historians would be about understanding how global interactions affected "local social and economic developments in different parts of the world in various time periods."⁵ The monitor's structure proposes a way to approach these interactions between economic, social, and environmental developments, while simultaneously suggesting the creation of bridges between economic and social (and environmental) historians. And by incorporating the *elsewhere* dimension, it also underscores the contemporary relevance of the colonial past and of colonial history.

Certainly, it is very important to keep in mind—especially when dealing with historically re-imagined monitors of the past—that, to a certain extent and for a variety of reasons, "all models are wrong", as statistician George Box famously noted.⁶ But what matters, ultimately, is whether they prove useful. And, crucially, the greatest strength of using this model as a starting point to research social and economic history lies in the establishment of a common language between history and action.

⁵ Pim De Zwart, "The Future of Global Economic History. Regional Comparisons to Address Global Questions," *TSEG - The Low Countries Journal of Social and Economic History* 15, nos. 2–3 (2018): 135, <https://doi.org/10.18352/tseg.1025>.

⁶ George E. P. Box, "Science and Statistics," *Journal of the American Statistical Association* 71, no. 356 (1976): 791, <https://doi.org/10.1080/01621459.1976.10480949>.